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GETTING INTO FIELD RESEARCH IN BRUNEI: IN 1968: An Autobiographical Sketch

Allen R. Maxwell

ABSTRACT

In a conversation with a colleague in 2005, at the Borneo Research Council meetings in Kuching, he suggested that I write up my experiences in getting to go to Brunei in 1968 to begin research for my Ph.D. dissertation. Previously I had decided that I wanted to carry out my research in Borneo. In achieving this goal, a number of difficulties were encountered, only a few of which were the following: (1) being refused permission to carry out research in Sarawak by Tom Harrisson, (2) having my academic advisor refuse to support me to carry out research in Indonesia, (3) after shifting my focus to Brunei finding anyone in the United States who had previously conducted research in Brunei, or even having been to Brunei, (4) learning that Brunei was at the time still part of the "Sterling area" and thus hitting a roadblock in arranging research funds while in Brunei, (5) after having applied for a visa to Brunei, with the British Consul General in New York, learning that the Sultan of Brunei had abdicated the throne, (6) meeting a roadblock in Brunei to purchasing topographic maps of the country for the research, (7) obtaining final resolution of my visa status in Brunei, and (8) having an unwanted and uninvited American journalist arrive at my field site in Brunei. While these perhaps should have been off-putting, they were not. I persevered and had a wonderful time doing field research in Brunei.

GETTING INTO FIELD RESEARCH IN BRUNEI: IN 1968:

An Autobiographical Sketch

by

Allen R. Maxwell

In a conversation with a colleague in 2005, at the Borneo Research Council meetings in Kuching, he suggested that I write up my experiences in getting to go to Brunei in 1968 to begin research for my Ph.D. dissertation. Previously I had decided that I wanted to carry out my research in Borneo. In achieving this goal, a number of difficulties were encountered, only a few of which were the following: (1) being refused permission to carry out research in Sarawak by Tom Harrisson, (2) having my academic advisor refuse to support me to carry out research in Indonesia, (3) after shifting my focus to Brunei finding anyone in the United States who had previously conducted research in Brunei, or even having been to Brunei, (4) learning that Brunei was at the time still part of the "Sterling area" and thus hitting a roadblock in arranging research funds while in Brunei, (5) after having applied for a visa to Brunei, with the British Consul General in New York, learning that the Sultan of Brunei had abdicated the throne, (6) meeting a roadblock in Brunei to purchasing topographic maps of the country for the research, (7) obtaining final resolution of my visa status in Brunei, and (8) having an unwanted and uninvited American journalist arrive at my field site in Brunei. While these perhaps should have been off-putting, they were not. I persevered and had a wonderful time doing field research in Brunei.

INTRODUCTORY

This essay recounts how I came to go to Brunei in 1968 to carry out ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation at Yale University. This is a paper that I had never thought of writing. It grows out of a chance conversation with

a colleague, Abdul Halim Ali, at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), during the summer of 2005 while I was in Sarawak to attend the KNOWLEDGE 2005: Making Libraries Relevant, a symposium commemorating the 5th anniversary of the State Library of Sarawak. As a result of our conversation, my colleague convinced me to write it, saying that many people would like to read about how I came to do research in Brunei. The story is embedded in the longer tale of how my interest in Southeast Asia and Borneo first developed.

I had pursued my undergraduate career at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where I first studied anthropology and linguistics (B.A. Anthropology 1961), and immediately after graduation, entered Michigan's master's programme in linguistics (M.A. Linguistics 1962).¹ During my senior year, 1961, one of my professors, William J. Gedney, approached me with the proposal that I join his team, in the summer of 1961. Prof. Gedney, a linguist whose special field was the Thai language and Thai linguistics, had been put in charge of the intensive Thai language course for the first Peace Corps training programme for Thailand. I thus joined a number of my fellow graduate students as a glorified "drill instructor" in an intensive Thai language course for the volunteers.² It was my experience with this programme that convinced me that it was Southeast Asia that I wished to pursue as an area for future anthropological fieldwork.³

My experience with Peace Corps Training Program Thailand #1 (summer 1961) and Peace Corps Training Program Thailand #2 (winter 1962), however, convinced me that I would not want to pursue field research in Thailand. The reason has nothing to do with the many wonderful Thai students I had met while working for the Peace Corps, or with Thailand, per se, but rather with the state of the publication of dictionary materials for the Thai language, in the early 1960s. Because of my interests in language and linguistics, I knew I would be happier studying an area in which the language was "well dictionaryed," that is a language for which there had been a long tradition of publishing dictionaries. It soon became clear, in conversations with fellow students, faculty, and colleagues, that it

was the Indonesian or Malay language which would most completely satisfy my wishes.⁴

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

It was about at this time that the U.S. government began a programme to support graduate study of a number of languages less widely known in the United States. It thus would be possible, if I could win a fellowship, to secure the necessary financial support for the academic portion of a programme of graduate study. After obtaining the necessary information regarding which universities had been designated centres for the study of Indonesian by the federal government, and thus eligible for the fellowship programme, I decided to apply to the Yale Southeast Asia Program for the M.A. degree. However, I learned later in conversation with the linguist, Isidore Dyen, who was, at the time, on the admissions committee for the Southeast Asia Program, why I had applied to Yale's Southeast Asia Program for an M.A. degree and been accepted to Yale's Anthropology Department for a Ph.D. When Dyen saw my application to the former programme, he decided that because at the time I would come to Yale I would already have an M.A. in Linguistics from Michigan, I did not need spend time on another M.A. degree. Dyen thus sent my application directly over to the Department of Anthropology at Yale University, which accepted me for the Ph.D. programme.

Yale University had been designated a centre for the study of Indonesian so I had applied for, and later received, a fellowship from the National Defense Foreign Language Title VI Indonesian Program, which I held 1962-1966. Yale was a particularly attractive place to study for a Ph.D. in anthropology because it had a long tradition of emphasis on language and linguistics.⁵ Because I held a foreign language fellowship, which required me to take an intensive course in Indonesian each term while I was in the Ph.D. programme in anthropology, my comprehensive written examinations in anthropology were delayed from the normal 1st and 2nd years of graduate study to the 2nd and 3rd years of my programme. While I was in graduate school at Yale, I had received a Selective Service

classification of 2-S, a student deferment from the military draft, from my local Selective Service Board.⁶

After beginning my studies at Yale, I began to seek out a possible site for field research. The island of Borneo soon became of interest. What attracted my attention was that a number of groups in Borneo had traditionally hunted the heads of their enemies and rivals. Thus a question was posed, Why did human beings hunt each others' heads?⁷ While the question seems straightforward, the answer is not. There seems, out of the many proposed explanations, that there probably is not a single answer to the question. A better way to proceed seems to me to be, Why do the people of this or that social group hunt heads?⁸ It appears that different groups do it for different reasons.⁹

As I proceeded to plan for fieldwork, I first chose Sarawak, and began a correspondence by letter with Tom Harrisson, then Curator of the Sarawak Museum and Government Ethnologist. Harrisson's comments were encouraging, but not very. He later visited Yale and the Peabody Museum, while on his travels for the support of endangered sea-turtles, when I was able to meet him. We continued our correspondence after he returned to Sarawak. I eventually received a letter from him telling me that field research in Sarawak for me (or anyone else) would not be possible at that time.¹⁰ I can only surmise that the aftermath of the Brunei Rebellion, which had broken out on December 8, 1962, and was the lead-in to the Konfrontasi between Malaysia and Indonesia, may have coloured Harrisson's decision (see, e.g., Harrisson, 1963). In addition, there may have been the issue/matter of the leftover communist terrorists (CTs) and the Clandestine Communist Organisation (CCO) in Sarawak (e.g., Jayl 2007: 296-298), from the Konfrontasi which followed the Brunei Rebellion (see, e.g., Bailey, 1963; Poulgrain, 1998; Saunders, [1994] 2002; Jitam and Klabu, 2007; Siburat, 2007; Ngau, 2007; Sim, 2007). While Konfrontasi was pretty much over with in 1966, following the fall of Sukarno in 1965, remnants of communist terrorism lasted until 1970, when the peace accord was signed in Simanggang, Sarawak, Oct. 21, 1974 (Chin and Jayl, 2007: 18), which was renamed Bandar Sri Aman, to commemorate the accord.[†]